Joanna Chi-Hsin Kang's Paper Topic:
"The Emergence of Singlehood in the 20th and early 21st century: Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan"

Introduction

In East Asia, Confucian philosophy is the dominant value system, especially its prominent doctrine of filial piety. Filial piety is a requirement of life, and being filial is an essential approach to acquire public recognition as an individual with integrity. The most unfilial and unforgivable behavior is being unmarried or sonless.[1] However, there are more and more Asian women who are immersed in this social milieu yet are choosing to embrace their singlehood. The liberation of Asian women is one of the momentous outcomes of Western modernization. This is also a trans-cultural trend that spans nations, societies, and ideologies. What reasons impel Asian women to choose a generally acknowledged difficult lifestyle? Why would they rather be stigmatized as a social outsider than have a reputation of virtue as a member of a collectivist society? This article will analyze the factors that impact these Asian women's decision-making processes and the forces which lead them into an unconventional lifestyle in East Asian society: singlehood. These arguments will be embodied and compared through specific case analyses from women in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan.

Single Women in East Asia: Regional Comparisons

Hong Kong

I. Background information

The group of single women in Hong Kong has demonstrated that numbers do talk. According to the 2003 Population Census Report from the Census and Statistics Department of the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong has a population of 6.8 million; the number of never-married women between the ages of 18 to 60 is over 653,400. Moreover, both widows, who are dependent on their adult children and single women between the ages of 18 to 60, number at approximately 49,800. In short, these unmarried women occupy 10.2% of the total population in Hong Kong which is about 700,000 and impressively, most of them have received at least a secondary education. In addition, the average age of a single woman in Hong Kong is 41 years, which is older than her counterpart in Mainland

[1] Mencius, The Works of Mencius , Book IV, Part I, Li-Lau, Mencius said, "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them.", 372-289 B.C.

China of 36 years and the global average age of 39 years.[2]

II. Factors of remaining single

The Young Women Christian Association (Y.W.C.A) in Hong Kong, the Centre on Behavioral Health of The University of Hong Kong, and one influential periodical, Ming Pao Monthly, all have deeply researched on the enigmatic issue of why many modern Hong Kong women are prone to remain single when they are more empowered than ever. After integrating these analytical contents, we can distinctly attribute several reasons to this prevailing social phenomenon. They are the disproportion of both sexes, the marital concerns of men in Hong Kong, the highly economical independence of Hong Kong women, and the impact of Western Modernization.[3]

First of all, the group of marriageable women in Hong Kong is quite larger than marriageable men. According to the data from the Census and Statistics Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has shown that, in 2002, women between the ages of 22 to 44 outnumbered their male counterparts by 210,000.[4] Furthermore, it leads to the disproportion of both sexes in current Hong Kong society and lack of available bachelors is one of the major difficulties when Hong Kong women consider their marriages. Furthermore, one of the main causes is that there are more and more male Hong Kong citizens marrying Mainland brides, and also helping these brides to move to Hong Kong. According to a recent demographic survey, since 1996, this growing tendency gradually leads to the disproportion of both sexes in Hong Kong. For instance, in 2006, the number of registered newlywed couples is 50,300 pairs, and 18,000 pairs out of that number are interregional marriages. It reflects that at least 36% of the brides are mainlanders.[5]

Secondly, Hong Kong women's current pairing predicament has gotten worse because Hong Kong males are more favorable towards brides from Mainland China.[6] Owing to the deep influence of Han's patrilineal ideology, usually a Chinese man is expected to play the dominant role in a family, and he prefers to have a wife with less

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[2] Population Census 2003, the Statistics Department of the Government of Hong Kong

[3] ZhaoHui Ye & ShuYing Xie, "The Special topic: The influence of disproportion of both sexes in Hong Kong society", *Ming-Pao Monthly*, April 2007

[4] Population Census 2002, the Statistics Department of the Government of Hong Kong

[5] "The Trend of Marrying Mainlander Brides in Hong Kong", www.news.cn, April 24 2006

[6] "35% Hong Kong Men Married Mainlander Brides", *Oriental Daily*, February 23rd 2007

education than himself.[7] Marrying a more feminine, submissive, and docile figure will fulfill the image of a recognizable couple in his family and the society. Hence, those Hong Kong men are less likely to choose these empowered and modernized Hong Kong women for marriage.[8]

Moreover, greater communication and interaction between Hong Kong and Mainland China have made these comparatively more conservative Mainland Chinese brides become available and appealing in the marriage pool. This is one of the primary reasons for the increase of single women in Hong Kong. Thirdly, thanks to the British government's policy of compulsory popularized education which started in the 1970s, it has widely upgraded the educational standard of the citizens of Hong Kong, women in particular. The percentage of college educated females had increased from 30.3% in 1986 to 66.8% in 2000. In that same year, all medical schools in Hong Kong had more than 59.5% female students majoring in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and nursing. Also, 62.4% of students who were studying business and management in college were female. Furthermore, female students occupied 67.8% in the social sciences field; the field of liberal arts had 78% female students; and in education, female students dominated 72.7%. In 2001, 15.1% of women were college educated, compared with 17.8% of men. Women also made up more than half, 51.6%, of the students studying in college-level institutions in 2001.[9]

Subsequently, the percentage of educated women has been increasing rapidly since the 1970s, and it has assisted women in developing professional skills for participation in the labor market. During the 70s and 80s, Hong Kong's booming trading market provided the needs and openings for competent workers, and women were largely hired by industries.[10]

After more than 15 years' devotion, today's Hong Kong women have achieved a remarkable scenario in their workplace of equal salary and benefits, especially for those who live alone. "The median income of working women and men also exhibited a different pattern, while the median income of working women living alone at

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[7] "The Flight from Marriage", *The Economist*, August 20th -26th 2011, P.23

[8] "The Battle of Love between Men and Women in Hong Kong", *Yazhou Zhoukan*(YZZK), Volume 25, Issues 47, November 25 2011

[9] Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics, October 2002, "The Characteristics of Women and Men from the 2001 Population Census"3.9, the Statistics Department of the Government of Hong Kong

[10] "The Common Spinsters in modern Hong Kong", Wen Wei Po, May 9 2011

$15,000HKD was higher than that of their male counterparts at **$14,000HKD**."[11] Nevertheless, these economical achievements have also accompanied some far-reaching reforms of their changing traditional roles. For example, women in Hong Kong now expect more from their potential spouses, especially since their own criteria of education, profession, and financial capability have been highly elevated, and it adds to the challenges of identifying acceptable candidates.[12]

In terms of the idea of Western individualism and liberation, an individual would be accredited as a valuable one as long as she could be self-sufficient and independent, but not in terms of the cultural codes of Han's patrilineal society. In a traditional Han society, a woman would be regarded as worthless if she couldn't bear sons, and she was powerless to challenge these ingrained unfairness as well.[13] Just as one old Chinese saying goes, "A woman shares the fate of the man she married, no matter who he is." At the present day, as a result of the influence of western modernization and education, those empowered Hong Kong women have gained infinite possibilities through their own intelligence, diligence, and persistence. Accordingly, they become more reluctant to accept the oppressive traditional role in Han society, and those who don't want to compromise remain single.

Japan

I. Background information

In light of the Statistical Research from the Ministry of International Affairs and Communication in Japan, in the early 1970s, the number of marriages per year exceeded one million. The marriage rate at that time averaged above 10% (per 1,000 populations), highlighting signs of a marriage boom. In 2006, there were 740,000 marriages, and the marriage rate was 5.8 % (per 1,000 populations). In the same year, the mean age for a first marriage was 30.0 for men and 28.2 for women, increasing by 1.7 years and 2.6 years from the previous year, respectively. In the past twenty years, the declining marriage rate and the older marrying age in recent years are considered to be two major factors behind the downward trend in the live

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[11] Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics, October 2002, "The characteristics of Women and Men from the 2001 Population Census"3.16, the Statistics Department of the Government of Hong Kong

[12] http://ywca.org.hk/research/200312

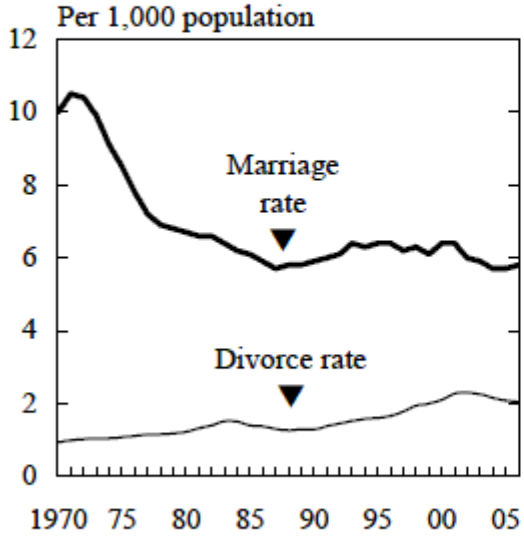
Y.W.C.A and the Centre on Behavioral Health of The University of Hong Kong

[13] ZhaoHui Ye & ShuYing Xie, "The Special topic: The influence of disproportion of both sexes in Hong Kong society", *Ming-Pao Monthly*, April 2007

birth rate.[14](See Figure 2.7andTable2.6)

In contrast, divorces have shown an upward trend since the 1960s, hitting a peak of 290,000 in 2002. Since then, the number of divorces and the divorce rate both have declined for four years straight. In 2006, the number of divorces totaled 257,000, and the divorce rate was 2.04%.

Figure 2.7
Changes in Marriage Rate and Divorce Rate



Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

Table 2.6
Mean Age of First Marriage

Year	Groom	Bride
1950	25.9	23.0
1955	26.6	23.8
1960	27.2	24.4
1965	27.2	24.5
1970	26.9	24.2
1975	27.0	24.7
1980	27.8	25.2
1985	28.2	25.5
1990	28.4	25.9
1995	28.5	26.3
2000	28.8	27.0
2004	29.6	27.8
2005	29.8	28.0
2006 *	30.0	28.2

Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

Furthermore, for most people in Japan, where unmarried parents are still rare, the main "benefit" of a marriage is children.[15] That is why some chauvinistic government officials and conservative media outlets judged these single or childless women as "selfish" because they are devastating the foundation of society by refusing to get married and have children. Japanese women's emerging singlehood has been eclipsed by the issue of long-term low fertility rate. However, their reluctance to get married is actually the primary factor that determines the phenomenon of low fertility.

In January 2007, Japan's Health Minister, Hakuo Yanagisawa, referred to women as "birth-giving machines" in a speech at a local political meeting. He called for

[14] Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication in Japan, Statistical Handbook of Japan 2007, Chapter 2 Population: Marriages and Divorces

[15] Sarah Buckley, "Japan's women wary to wed", BBC News, Asia-Pacific, 2004/09/28

women to try their best to have children in order to counter Japan's plummeting birth rate and aging population. He said: "Because the number of birth-giving machines and devices is fixed, all we can ask for is for them to do their best per head," and he added: "although it may not be so appropriate to call them machines."[16] Even in today's Japan, this kind of biased attitude still exists in the public forum.

In fact, the numbers of women who are refusing to play the role of "birth-machine" continues to grow; the percentage of Japanese women in their late 20s who have not married has increased from 30% to about 50% in the last 15 years. In addition, for the first time in 2007, 25% of all Japanese women aged 30 to 35 are unmarried. It is an unprecedented change in a patriarchal and conservative society like Japan, a place where marriage was once valued as an imperative obligation and priority for a woman.[17]

II. Factors of remaining single

The journalist of BBC News, Sarah Buckley, unveiled Japanese women's changing attitudes toward marriage and why they are wary to wed.[18] She concluded that the main factors which are stimulating more and more Japanese women to embrace the single life are the enormously imbalanced division of housework, the incorrigible and inflexible labor market, and the modern ideas of liberation. In contemporary Japanese society, male chauvinism still dominates. It is reflected in several observable facts, based on the briefing of Japan's changing demographics from The Economist in July 2007.[19] The researchers stated that the imbalance of household division is one of the crucial factors which lead to the serious issue of the

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[16] BBC News, Asia-Pacific, "Japan women called child machines", 2007/01/27

[17] It emerged from the long history of modern education for women after Meiji Reform.

"*The Meiji school system aimed to include all girls at the primary level, and a law passed in 1899 called for the establishment of at least one secondary school for girls in each prefecture. The curriculum designed for girls' uniformity inculcated the virtues the government considered appropriate to the 'good wife, wise mother'. In primary school, in addition to practical subjects shared with boys, girls' education emphasized 'female modesty'. Girls' secondary school training did not prepare them for further academic study, but rather encouraged them to acquire the 'refined taste' appropriate to middle- class households.*", see Frank B. Tipton, "The Rise of Asia: Economics, Society, and Politics in Contemporary Asia", Chapter 5 The First Asian Tiger: The Transformation of Japan, p.156~159

[18] Sarah Buckley, "Japan's women wary to wed", BBC News, Asia-Pacific, 2004/09/28

[19] "Cloud, or silver linings?", Briefing Japan's changing demography, *The Economist*,July28th-August 3rd 2007,"P24~26

fast-aging and shrinking population in Japan. They also interviewed Mr. Hideki Yamada, the director for policy on aging and fertility in the Cabinet Office. "It's embarrassing to say this," admits Mr. Yamada, "but after a first child is born, the husband often doesn't do his bit helping out at home." In fact, this idea is also associated with *cultural habit.* Kuniko Inoguchi, Minister for Gender Issues and Social Affairs under Mr. Koizumi, says "Boys are pampered at home by their mothers and expect the same treatment—no nappy-changing, no washing up—later from their wives." A lot of modern Japanese women seem to avoid this predictable circumstance by avoiding marriage, but how do they escape? Masahiro Yamada, a sociology professor at Tokyo Gakugei University, after completing a variety of surveys coined the title "parasite single" and pointed out that more than 70% of single women in Tokyo who live at home and about half of them pay rent to their parents.[20] According to him, the main reason why these single women remain at home is that life at home is too comfortable, compared to married life. This young generation was born and "spoiled" in an affluent time; moreover, unmarried daughters usually expect to live with their parents until they get married. Also, they don't need to do laundry, cooking, or other housework because their own mothers are playing the major domestic roles for them. Nevertheless, once they decide to get married, they will play the part that their mother always played: taking care of husbands, having children, and being decent full-time housewives. For many Japanese women, it seems like an either/or situation—work and embrace financial independence or get married and look after a house and children. This dilemma is aggravated by the obstinate labor market in Japan. Just like one Japanese woman, Hiroe Shibata, who works for a multinational pharmaceutical company in Tokyo, responded to BBC's journalist Sarah Buckley, "If you get married, your parents expect you to have a baby. If you have a baby, it's going to be difficult to manage your work and bring up children."[21] In addition, Tamako Sarada, a well-known Japanese writer said, "In the United States or Europe, it is possible to pursue a career even after having a baby, but in Japan, if after marrying, a woman then realizes there is something she wants to do in her previous workplace, she has almost no chance to come back."[22] That's a common predicament which is always haunting modern Japanese women's minds.

In addition, there is one vivid story from The Economist which reveals how

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[20] "Japan's New Material Girls: 'Parasite Singles' Put Off Marriage for Good Life", by Kathryn Tolbert, Washington Post Foreign Service, Page A01, 2/10/2000

[21] Sarah Buckley, "Japan's women wary to wed", BBC News, Asia-Pacific, 2004/09/28

[22] "Japan's New Material Girls: 'Parasite Singles' Put Off Marriage for Good Life", by Kathryn Tolbert, Washington Post Foreign Service, Page A01, 2/10/2000

severe this topic is, and how Yasuyuki Nambu, a successful Japanese businessman, utilizes his vision and empathy to make Japan's labor market more flexible to women.[23] He established a non-profit organization to place women in flexible, part-time jobs because he was struck by the brutal injustices of Japan's workplace after he graduated from college in 1976. Nambu found that men were far more likely to be hired than women and were paid much more for the same job, and women who left their jobs to have a family found returning to work almost impossible.

The wage gap between men and women in Japan resulted from several factors. The most significant one is a common practice in many Japanese enterprises—the seniority wage system. Since women would resign for reasons of marriage, childbirth, and childcare, they are not expected to serve the company as long as their male counterparts. The difference of men and women's average length of service for their companies directly reflects the great gap of their wage.[24]

Therefore, Yasuyuki Nambu decided to help these married women to find flexible jobs which they can balance with child-caring and housework. After a while, his father suggested turning this job-placement scheme into a commercial venture. The result was Pasona, a firm that now has annual revenues of around $2 billion yen and which sends around a quarter of a million people off to a job every day. The great amount of money he has earned implies how great this need is, and how unequal and rigid the labor market for Japanese women is.

In January 2008, *The Japan Times* published an article titled "Making day care fit real needs: Deregulation of Japan's licensed nursery system threatens its effectiveness". The columnist, Suzannah Tartan, reported that: "A study in the Asian Economic Journal in 2005 estimated that the total number of families in Japan with mothers who would like to work but believe they cannot get a day-care spot was nearly equal to the total number of children in day care from ages 1 to 3. In other words, if day-care space were available, a much higher percentage of mothers would return to the workforce."[25]

Furthermore, the idea of liberation and individualism brings struggles for women

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[23] "Face value: Changing how Japan works", *The Economist*, September 29th~October 5th 2007,p.74

[24] Japan Institute of Workers' Evolution, "The Situation of Women in Japan: Working Women, 2.1 Outline", available from http://www.jiwe.or.jp/english/situation/working.html

[25] Suzannah Tartan, "Making day care fit real needs: Deregulation of Japan's licensed nursery system threatens its effectiveness", *The Japan Times*, January 22 2008

in current Japan. They are grappling with a choice between traditional roles and modern freedoms. Their rising self-awareness is now fighting against social expectations. For instance, there is one extraordinary example to embody this tension from the clash of tradition and modernity: Japan's Princess, Masako. After she married the Prince and entered the Imperial family, she was forced to sacrifice her high-flying and beloved diplomatic career to concentrate on bearing a male heir. In early 2004, she was diagnosed with a nervous disorder due to stress.[26]

In addition to this concrete case, there are some pop-cultural idioms that can partly reflect the views held by Japanese patriarchal society. These terms include the Christmas cakes, the New Year's Eve noodles, and the Underdogs. During the 1990s, a popular saying was, "Japanese women are like Christmas cakes. If they surpass the 25th, 【Christmas day or their own birthday】, they will be difficult to dispose of." A woman's value in the "marriage market" is based on her age. Once she is over 25, she will lose her competitiveness and attraction quickly.[27] It was quite a prevalent term to mock unmarried women. After the 1990s, due to Japan's fast changing economy, women have contributed more labor force than ever, and it naturally led to the delay of their marriageable age. As a consequence, this cursed number became 31, the New Year's Eve noodles.[28] In the traditional Japanese society, it is an ancient custom that people must eat long Buckwheat Soba noodles on New Year's Eve. It turned into another stigma to satirize unmarried women who are over 30. Nobody will eat New Year's Eve noodles after December 31st, thereby inferring that no man will think a 30-year-old woman is still desirable, or at least not eligible enough to marry. These discriminatory verbal abuses reflect the growing tide of popular opinion by the shrinking population and declining fertility. These two social phenomena are related. As the shrinking population problem becomes more severe, the blame placed upon single women becomes more intense.

As a result, a brilliant female writer, Sakai Junko, wrote one bestseller named *The Underdogs' Yowl* (*MAKEINU NO TOOBOE*) in 2002 which has sold millions of

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[26] Ben Hills," Princess Masako: Prisoner of the Chrysanthemum Throne: The tragic true story of Japan's Crown Princess", First Published Random House Australia Pty Limited, Sydney, Australia, 2006

[27] Japanese Cultural Glossary: Traditional terms and pop-cultural references, http://www.redbrick.dcu.ie/~melmoth/japan/c.html

[28] Yuri Kageyama, "Japanese women are increasingly passing up marriage", *The Seattle Times*, 11/23/2004

copies in Japan. The term, Makeinu, actually comes from a folk idiom.[29] Sakai Junko quoted it to categorize unmarried and childless Japanese women as Makeinu. In a narrow sense, it means "losers" and "ones who failed in the battles". In this spellbinding book, she tried to analyze why more and more Japanese women would rather be labeled as stale cakes or noodles than submit to marriage. In addition, Miss Sakai Junko is an "underdog" herself. She interpreted with empathy that many unmarried women are not intentionally resisting the entire social custom. Japanese women remain single because they have doubted whether marriage can bring a better living standard; by getting married they might lose their freedom and financial independence. Before this unconventional sentiment occurred, many young Japanese women were longing for married life, particularly during the period after the burst of the bubble economy.[30]

On the other hand, this enlarging group of Underdogs would represent the newly developed liberalization and individualism in Japan, and how the modern education has inculcated and stimulated them to embrace their own individuality and self-realization. Accordingly, this pervasive tendency of being single certainly reflects the modern liberation of women in Japan.

Taiwan

I. Background information

Based on the data from the Department of Statistics which is subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan, in 1994, the number of marriages was 171,074; the marriage rate was 8.1%. In 2004, there were 129,274 marriages, and the marriage rate was 5.7%. The proportion of marriageable single women has changed swiftly as well; they rose from minority to majority in one decade. For instance, in 1983, the unmarried rate of Taiwanese women between the ages of 20 to 24 was 62.6%. In 2004, it became 89.5%. Moreover, another group of the ages of 25 to 29 was 21.0% in 1983, and in 2004, the unmarried rate had escalated to 59.1%.

Furthermore, this formidable increase of unmarried rate also can be seen in women of the ages of 30 to 34. In 1983, the unmarried rate of this group was 8.7%; in 2004, it grew to 26.9%.

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[29] Sakai Junko, "Underdogs' yowl < MAKEINU NO TOOBOE>", original Japanese edition published by KODANSHA LTD,2003, ISBN 978-986-173-180-3, 2003

[30] Please check Figure 2.7 "Changes in Marriage rate and Divorce rate", the period of 1988~2000

Table 1-1: Rate of increasing unmarried women in Taiwan

Ages/ Unmarried Rate (♀)	1983	1988	1993	2000	2003	2004
15-19	96.1%	97.5%	97.5%	98.4%	98.9%	99.2%
20-24	52.6%	72.4%	76.3%	84.1%	88.0%	89.5%
25-29	21.0%	27.9%	36.0%	47.5%	55.8%	***59.1%***
30-34	8.7%	10.7%	14.5%	20.8%	25.1%	***26.9%***
35-39	4.8%	6.5%	8.4%	11.3%	13.8%	14.8%

Source: Department of Statistics, the Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan

In comparison, the number of divorces has sustained a lofty peak recently in three years. In 2004, the number of divorces totaled 62,635, and the divorce rate was 2.8%. Still, it was 2.9% in 2003, and 2.7% in 2002. Compared to fourteen years ago, in 1994, the number of divorces totaled 31,889, and the divorce rate was 1.5%.

Additionally, the female participation in the labor market has also hit the highest point in history. In 1999, over 46.0% of women were participating in Taiwan's labor market, and the number was over 3.85 million. Moreover, the number of female labor has increased to 4.27 million in 2004; the participant rate was 47.7%. Further, Taiwan has a population of 230 million, and the labor force occupied about 1/3 of it. Evidently, the female laborers force has engaged a large percentage of the entire labor market in Taiwan. It also reflected on the standard of wages. In 1999, a female laborer could gain 73.6% of a male laborer's average monthly salary. In 2004, it reached 77.6%.[31]

[31] Sources: Department of Statistics, the Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan, available from http://sowf.moi.gov.tw/19/quarterly/data

Table 1-2: The female participants in the labor market

Year	The number of available female labor (per 10,000 population)	Rate of female participation in the labor market
1999	385.6 (3.85million)	46.0%
2000	391.7 (3.91million)	46.0%
2001	397.7 (3.97million)	46.1%
2002	407.4 (4.07million)	46.6%
2003	417.2 (4.17million)	47.1%
2004	427.2 (4.27million)	47.7%

Source: Department of Statistics, the Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan

Table 1-3: The rising wages of female laborers

Year	The average monthly salary of one female employee (NTD)	Percentage of a male laborer's monthly salary
1999	34,016	73.6%
2000	35,066	74.1%
2001	35,683	75.8%
2002	35,955	77.7%
2003	36,548	77.9%
2004	37,104	77.6%

Source: Department of Statistics, the Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan

II. Factors of remaining single

In August 2005, during Chinese Valentine's Day, one popular and business-oriented magazine in Taiwan, *Cheers,* had presented an elaborate survey on the new challenges of Taiwanese career women. This cover story, titled "The Novel Definition of Work & Love", sharply illustrated that today's Taiwanese women are inclined to remain single but also listed the main factors that cause women's hesitant attitudes towards marriage.[32] Briefly speaking, there are several reasons to propel them to do so: the rising self-awareness of women which goes against social expectations, the severe imbalance of the marriage gradient and financial concerns.

First of all, sociologists attributed the hesitant reaction of Taiwanese women to the

[32] "Cover Story: The Novel Definition of Work & Love", *Cheers*, August 2005, p.84~92

idea of marriage to the prevalence of higher education and their direct participation in the labor market. Thanks to the implementation of popularized education that emerged from the 1950s to the present, gender was no longer a concern for a marginal efficiency of investment to a family. According to Professor Ming-Ching Luoh's academic essay, "Who are NTU (National Taiwan University) students? Differences across Ethnic and Gender Groups and Urban/Rural Discrepancy", before executing this educational policy, a traditional Taiwanese family would most likely give over all resources to the male offspring because men inherit the family property and ultimately carry the family name, not women. Therefore, he must pursue a higher education in order to manage his family well in the future. In addition, after this policy became a compulsory obligation for citizens, well-educated women started to mushroom like bamboo shoots after a spring rain in Taiwan.[33]

In addition, these educated Taiwanese women started to largely participate in the ascending market since the 1970s. It accompanied an unprecedented change. Based on her well-known case study in the sociology field in Taiwan, A *story of Mei-Ling*: *Between Filial Daughter and Loyal Sister: Global Economy and Family Politics in Taiwan*," the author and also a sociologist, Anru Lee, pointed out that Taiwanese women unexpectedly converted their old image of family's surplus subordination into a requisite labor power. Before this dramatic transformation occurred, females were always regarded as merchandise sold at a loss because of the custom of dowries, which was most often seen in the countryside. In many agricultural communities in Taiwan, elder residents still follow the traditional Han's patrimonial codes to the present day.

Additionally, in *The Women Gender & Development Reader*, one of the co-writers, Diane L. Wolf states that:

> "In Taiwan, daughters are socialized to be filial and to pay back the debt they incurred to parents for bringing them up. Parents socialize daughters that they themselves are worthless, and that literally everything they have—their bodies, their upbringing, their schooling—belong to their parents and has to be paid for. Since daughters permanently leave their natal home upon marriage, they must pay back their debt early in life. Because daughters were seen as 'short-term members' of the family, parents did

[33] Ming-Ching Luoh, " Who are NTU students?__ Differences across Ethnic and Gender Groups and Urban/Rural Discrepancy," Taiwan Economic Review,(2002) 30:1, 113-126

not 'waste' resources in schooling them."[34]

These notions implied that woman's education would not change a thing, because no matter how brilliant, competent, and successful she could be, she needed to marry someone in any case. Marrying a Taiwanese man means the bride is marrying his family at the same time. She must take care of her children, in-laws, and housework. Therefore, getting a degree could not shift those fundamental values at all. For these reasons, helping daughters to find nice in-laws was the major responsibility of their parents at all times until this sudden transition.[35]

In Anru Lee's *A story of Mei-Ling*, she articulately recorded Mei-Ling's words which reflect her struggles as a filial daughter. When Mei-Ling realized that Lee actually is a researcher who studies at a prestigious university in the US, she was so envious of Lee and Lee's parents' supportive attitude towards her academic research, but also felt depressed for her own situation. Mei-Ling said to Anru Lee:

> "all my family disagrees with my plan for pursuing higher education, because they think I will not need it. They only wish that I could get married as soon as possible; otherwise, I should stay at home and continuously work for my family. I used to work for my father, and right now, I'm working for my elder brother. But why should I always work for them? Why can't I do something I really want? Why should I sacrifice myself all the time? Is that fair? Do you think it is fair?"

Further, Mei-Ling explained to Lee why she would finish her study first rather than get married. Mei-Ling told Lee:

> "I know I must marry someone eventually. If I don't pursue my higher education now, then I will not have any opportunity to do so after I get married. Look at the facts: even my own parents are very reluctant to support my dream for completing

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[34] Diane L. Wolf, "Daughters, Decisions and Domination", *The Women Gender & Development Reader*, pp.121-127

[35] Anru Lee, "Between Filial Daughter and Loyal Sister: Global Economy and Family Politics in Taiwan," Women in the New Taiwan: Gender Roles and Gender Consciousness in a changing society, edited by Catherine Farris, Anru Lee, and Murray Rubinstein (2004). Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe

> my education. Who else is willing to support me? Will my in-laws do that? Don't be silly!"[36]

Progressively, today's Taiwanese women are contributing their labor force to the family which has helped them gain some independence and negotiating power in the family. This has resulted from the popularized higher education.
They are gradually separating themselves from the conventional thinking which is that a woman should sacrifice all for her family. The rising self-awareness of Taiwanese women stimulates the new needs of self-fulfillment and their career ambition, and they are not merely satisfied with occupying full-time domestic roles anymore.[37]

One cover story of *Cheers* in 2005, "The Novel Definition of Work & Love", featured and interviewed the Research Sociologist of Academia Sinica in Taiwan[38], Wen-Shan Yang, in which he was asked what the important factors are which drive Taiwanese women to remain single. He shrewdly explained the case of Taiwanese women with the sociological term—marriage gradient. However, Yang used a different approach to reinterpret this term, compared to its standard definition, which is as follows:

> In 1982, Jessie Bernard's *The Future of Marriage* has explicated that it is normative for men to "marry-down" and women to "marry-up" with respect to education, occupation, and other characteristics.
> In a related vein, as a result of this marriage gradient, highly educated or high earning women(the "cream-of-the crop"), and the less educated and lower earning men(the "bottom-of-the barrel") will be less likely to marry because there are no appropriate mates for them.
> Again, the changes in education, employment and income over the last

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[36] Anru Lee, "Between Filial Daughter and Loyal Sister: Global Economy and Family Politics in Taiwan," Women in the New Taiwan: Gender Roles and Gender Consciousness in a changing society, edited by Catherine Farris, Anru Lee, and Murray Rubinstein (2004). Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe

[37] "Cover Story: The Novel Definition of Work & Love", *Cheers*, August 2005, p.84~92

[38] **Academia Sinica**, the most preeminent academic institution in the Republic of China, was founded in 1928 to promote scholarly research in China and to undertake academic research in the sciences and humanities. After the government moved to Taiwan in 1949, Academia Sinica was re-established in Taipei. The growth of Academia Sinica during the transition period was slow due to political instability and meager budget.

> 40 years have resulted in more women becoming "cream-of-the crop" and this should explain declining marriage rates over time.[39]

Accepting this established definition, Wen-Shan Yang applied it to explain Taiwan's case. In traditional Han society, it is similar that women who marry-up would have a better chance to maintain a recognized and promising marriage. However, Mr. Wen-Shan Yang added, "nowadays, Taiwanese women have different interpretations of the marriage gradient; the gap between both sexes has become more complicated." Yang said, "The generally acknowledged process of the marital relationship has evolved into three stages, and they are Institutional Marriage, Companionship Marriage, and Independent Marriage."

The ultimate goal of a couple, who are in an Institutional Marriage, is to have children in order to extend the family bloodline. In the Institutional Marriage, the couple's housework is distinctively distributed. A couple in a Companionship Marriage, would cherish each other's spiritual life, and they are more like friends. If a couple stays in the Independent marriage, both of them are in a comfortable marital condition, yet they still are seeking their own self-realization.[40]

Yang indicated that there are a lot of Taiwanese women who are reluctant to get married for other than the so-called conventional definition of the marriage gradient. After all, today's Taiwanese women no longer need to rely on their spouses financially because of their competitive professions and available job opportunities. Consequently, they are expecting more from their spouses. Yang argued that, compared to the western world, the evolution process of marriage becomes condensed when Taiwanese women have been through so many changes and developments in such a short period of time. Western women spent more than 30 years to establish and complete the three stages of marriage evolution. Yet, Taiwanese women only used a decade to leap to the third stage, the Independent Marriage, because of the fast changing economy and the opportunities that educational policies offered them, such as higher education, better professions, and burgeoning ambitions. The sudden jump in stages indicates the major shift in cultural norms which contributed to the high

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[39] Berna Miller Torr, "The Marriage Gradient Transition: Changing Selection into Marriage by Education and Income for men and women, 1940~2000", 2004 August, *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Hilton San Francisco & Renaissanc Parc 55 Hotel, San Francisco, CA,*, Aug 14, 2004 *Online* <**.PDF**>. 2008-04-22 <http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p109839_index.html>

[40] "Cover Story: The Novel Definition of Work & Love", *Cheers*, August 2005, p.86~87

unmarried rate since men have not been ready for this drastic change.

Accordingly, most of them are still at the earliest stage—the Institutional Marriage. In a word, the huge divergence between men and women's expectation for marriage is one of the fundamental concerns that led to the Taiwanese women's reluctance to get married.

Lastly, economical considerations are a significant force contributing to this prevailing tendency of singlehood. For instance, in Taiwan, due to the popularized education, more and more people have to pursue higher degrees in order to equip themselves for job competition. Consequently, they have to stay in school much longer for acquiring competitive criteria, and this delays the graduation date, and also the marriageable date. According to the IMD's annual report of world competitiveness in 2005, the average working hours of one employee are 2,327 hours a year in Taiwan which listed at Number 4 in the world ranking for the indicator of the level of hard work.[41] Scholar Wei-Shan Yang utilized this result from IMD to argue that most Taiwanese must work diligently to gain recognition in their workplace. Yang said, "Taiwanese have to work really hard for their financial stability and that's why many women have to consider their job prospect before they decide to get married." Just like many other Asian women have to face potential predicaments after they get married, they will be expected to have children in order to meet their obligation as filial daughters-in-law. Having babies would bring unpredictable consequences to their careers. For example, in today's Taiwan, women are frequently coerced to sign some unofficial contracts for acquiring employment, such as *The Single Contract* and *Non-pregnant Ordinance*. Generally speaking, *The Single Contract* mandates that a female employee should stay single to maintain her employment. If she decided to get married, she would lose her job.[42] As for the *Non-pregnant Ordinance*, it indicates that a female employee is forbidden from getting pregnant. If she insists on having children, she must resign. Even these unofficial agreements are illegal now after *The Gender Equality in Employment Act* has been implemented; however, the lawsuits of gender discrimination in career women's workplace are still very common nowadays; in most of these cases, the

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[41] http://www.imd.ch/research/centers/wcc/upload/Fundamentals.pdf
The IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook 2005

[42] The Internet Service for Women: Women Web, July 2006, Issue& Discussions: Gender Equality in Employment , Part 1, " the Discrimination in workplace," available from http://womenweb.org.tw/MainWeb/discuss

plaintiffs are pregnant employees.[43]

In addition, due to the recent economical recession in Taiwan, the cost of starting a family is getting much more expensive than before; especially the salaries of young graduates can hardly cover their living expenses. Therefore, many single women would rather live with their parents than establish new families. Sociologists believe that this situation will change when the economy recovers. As long as the national economy goes up, people would definitely go back to the marriage market, and it is just a matter of time.[44]

All in all, the factor of financial concerns is one of the solid reasons to draw more and more Taiwanese women away from marriage. However, there are other factors which are involved in these women's decision-making process, including their rising self-awareness creating conflicts with social expectations and the issue of the marriage gradient.

Conclusion

To summarize, it is evident from these mentioned-case analyses, single Asian women in Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan, have faced some similar concerns which influenced their decision –making process with regards to marriage, including the struggles with pursuing self-realization and playing traditional marital roles, the severe marriage gradient between both sexes, the common patriarchal attitudes among employers and in government in East Asia, and rising individualism.

First of all, in Taiwan and Japan, women remain single longer because now they all have much better educational opportunities and job options; therefore, many of them choose to avoid marriage in order to equip their knowledge bases and then achieve their ambitions in the workplace. These are aspirations their mothers' generation could not acquire.

In December 2006, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific had a seminar on fertility transition in Asia and its opportunities

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[43] The Internet Service for Women: Women Web, August 2006, Issue& Discussions: Gender Equality in Employment , Part 2, "the Discrimination of Pregnancy," available from http://womenweb.org.tw/MainWeb/discuss

[44] "Cover Story: The Novel Definition of Work & Love", *Cheers*, August 2005, p.86~87

and changes. That meeting was in Bangkok, and Mr. Gavin W. Jones[45] gave the presentation on the issue of fertility decline in Asia, "Fertility Decline in Asia: the Role of Marriage Change". In his argument, he attributed the declining fertility rate to the role of women's marriage delay; further, he discovered the correlative link between the sharp rise in Labor force participation rates for females (LFPRs) and delayed marriage. However, it is difficult to establish the causality because of the "chicken and egg" issue: did women remain single longer because they were in the workplace, or were they in the workplace because they were still single? Professor Gavin W. Jones took Japan as one illustration: the female participation rate in Japan's labor market has increased faster after 1975 for women aged 25~29 than for women in other age groups. This seems to suggest that some differences were occurring at age 25~29. The rate was much higher for single women. The LFPRs for single women rose over this period from 81% in 1972 to 92% in 1999. It indicates a substantial increase in the opportunity cost for women to quit their jobs to marry and have children. Because they stayed at their jobs longer, the age of marriage rose.[46]

Furthermore, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, all single women seem to have one concern in common, especially when they attempt to get married. They all have difficulty in finding eligible candidates for their potential marriages. These young women's criteria of education, profession, and financial capability have been highly elevated, and they add to the challenges of identifying acceptable candidates. In Taiwan, it is called "marriage gradient", and Professor Gavin W. Jones' research has reinforced it:

> **In theory, young people may be avoiding marriage for reasons that differ from those that influence married couples to avoid having children. For instance, marriage itself could be seen by young women who intend to pursue a bright career as a distraction from their goal, or they may be delaying it involuntarily, and these women often faced a hardness: a lack of suitable partners; the "good man is hard to find" syndrome. In the real life, marriage is a package, as it is not simply about the relationship between people, but tightly linked with childbearing, childrearing, and other**

[45] Gavin W. Jones, Professor, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

[46] Gavin W. Jones, Paper prepared for the ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) seminar on "Fertility Transition in Asia: opportunities and Challenges", 18-20 December 2006, Bangkok,pp9

family obligations.[47]

In addition, to marry without the plan to have children is still considered aberrant behavior throughout the East Asian region, particularly in the areas where they have internalized Confucian doctrines. It is exemplified by a well-known ancient saying from Mencius (372-289 B.C.), "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them." There is no doubt that after marrying, young couples are subjected to considerable pressure to have a baby from the family and to a lesser extent from friends. As a consequence, the easiest way to avoid such intense pressure is to remain single. Although single women are also urged to marry, the pressure may be exerted more on married women to deliver their first child.[48]

Also, the general patriarchal attitudes among employers and in government result in poor workplace conditions for the needs of working mothers, and working wives, adding huge stress to the lives of women with children. Taking Japanese women as an example,

> their husbands work long hours; child care is limited; baby sitters are expensive; and if married women decide to work part-time, they are paid less than half of a full-time worker. Additionally, Japan ranks No.38 in a UN measure which monitors female wages and public power; in 1998, its research shows 0.16% of men took paternity leave.[49]

Yoshiro Mori, the former Prime Minster before the Koizumi, has argued that childless women should not receive pension benefits: "It is truly strange to say that we have to use tax money to take care of women who don't even give birth once, who grow old living their lives selfishly."[50] This shows how the Japanese patriarchy does

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[47] Gavin W. Jones, Paper prepared for the ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) seminar on "Fertility Transition in Asia: opportunities and Challenges", 18-20 December 2006, Bangkok,pp10

[48] Gavin W. Jones, Paper prepared for the ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) seminar on "Fertility Transition in Asia: opportunities and Challenges", 18-20 December 2006, Bangkok,pp10

[49] Sarah Buckley, "Japan's women wary to wed", BBC News, Asia-Pacific, 2004/09/28

[50] Hannah Beech, *Time* Magazine, "The Wasted Asset: Japanese women are smart and entrepreneurial, so why is so little effort made to harness their talents?", August 22nd, 2005

regard women's wombs as public property, and the formidable stress they have to carry if she could not produce children because she stays single. However, as a married woman, not having children would be scrutinized more closely and criticized more harshly by the society, and the ensuing surveillance from her in-laws and peers would engender greater pressure that a single woman would not face. Remaining single would be a relatively easier choice for Asian women since the subsequent difficulties of married life could be insufferable.

Finally, the greater stress on individualism has led to self-determination and a related downgrading in the importance that people attach to realizing social customs such as getting married and having children.[51] Moreover, these three countries are greatly affected by modern values from the western world, especially when the liberal ideas of human rights and gender equality have been instilled in widespread popularized modern education. They all live in a region which has an engrained family-oriented value system; those who are not family-oriented would be marginalized as a pariah. Nonetheless, they still have the courage to fight against the social expectations. Liberation and individualism have played remarkable roles in the changes to their decision-making process.

All in all, there are several major factors to impel Asian women to avoid marriage. They include the rapid rise in women's educational levels and increasing employment opportunities for giving women strong incentives to enter the workplace; however, the unwillingness and patriarchal attitudes of employers and governmental policies have led them to have no choice but stay single. Otherwise, they would have to face the consequences that accompany marriage and the plight of balancing work and childrearing. Further, the steepness of marriage gradient makes finding an ideal spouse extremely complicated. Modern Asian women expect their future spouses to have equally progressive views on marriage. Lastly, when living in a collectivism-oriented society like East Asia, she would rather choose an unconventional lifestyle which will be stigmatized and condemned, and be labeled as a daredevil than to play a well-recognized traditional role. Individualism plays a major role in these women's decision-making process, and it strengthens the faith of these single women in Asia, the faith that drives them to believe they have the rights to pursue what they deserve as human beings.

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[51] Paper prepared for the ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) seminar on "Fertility Transition in Asia: opportunities and Challenges", 18-20 December 2006, Bangkok,pp11

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